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# **The Strength of Weak Legitimacy: a cultural analysis of legitimacy in capitalist, liberal, democratic nation-states**

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## **Abstract**

Adapting Granovetter's idea of the 'strength of weak ties' (1973), this article argues that capitalist, liberal democratic nation-states ('liberal societies') distribute both power and processes of legitimation widely across society. Against the view that such societies are only weakly legitimate, relying primarily on ideological hegemony, I argue that they enjoy real, but highly systemically diffused legitimacy. To advance this argument I consider some the inherent problems in studying legitimacy in liberal contexts, and offer a preliminary outline of a cultural analysis of liberal legitimacy, exploring how legitimation processes are embedded in state-economy relations, civil society structures, public-private distinctions, and competition as a ubiquitous social form. In this way I aim to encourage a more sociocultural, and less state-centric understanding of power and its legitimation in liberal society.

## **Introduction: Understanding Power in Liberal Nation-States**

Nation-states based on an interdependence of capitalist economies, liberal values, and democratic political institutions and procedures, are ascendant (Dahl 2000; Dunn 2006)<sup>1</sup>. They have proliferated over the last 200 years, and become the dominant international model of the ideal nation-state. Even China's current efforts to digest this model piecemeal, attests to its success. Part of this success has to do with the sheer international competitiveness of the model, in generating wealth, capturing resources, creating alliances, defending territory, and prosecuting geopolitical interests. But another important part of this success, my concern here, has to do with how the power relations generated within such states are rendered acceptable to society's members, in short, how they are successfully legitimated, so that these sociopolitical systems remain relatively stable. I argue that prevalent ways of conceptualizing legitimacy are often inadequate for this task, being too narrowly defined in terms of formal political processes. We need a more thoroughgoing cultural analysis to understand how an entire complex of institutions, ideas, identities, values and rituals combine in an historical cultural pattern to permeate liberal society, serving to legitimate its power relations. Toward this end this article examines the idea of legitimacy and its relationship to liberalism, and then presents a preliminary framework for guiding the kind of cultural analysis proposed.

I make two further points about the importance of this topic before proceeding. First, scholars frequently identify a 'civic' or 'liberal' type of nation (Mann 2005: 55-61; Miller 1995; Brown, D. 2000), and one of the more influential ways of explaining people's allegiance to this kind of nation is Michael Billig's (1995) thesis of 'banal nationalism', that nationhood becomes a kind of everyday, taken-for-granted discursive frame. Without gainsaying Billig's insights, I think this approach also misses much, placing too much weight on how implicit knowledge and discourse shapes social action, and not enough on how power is actually organized and understood by social actors. I aim to add a further dimension to our thinking here. More deeply, highly economically liberal nation-states, such as the US and the UK, also exhibit the most pronounced social inequality within the nation (Keister and Moller 2000; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Kawachi and Kennedy 2006). And yet liberal nation-states have their modern origins in the wave 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century revolutions that were premised on ideas of equality among members of the nation (Bendix 1978; Greenfeld 1993; Author 2009). Why people in these societies accept such extremes of inequality, how modern nationalisms manage to extol 'equality' while institutionalizing hierarchy and inequalities, are persistent questions for our times.

## **Legitimacy: General and Liberal**

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I will use the shorthand term 'liberal society' to succinctly indicate the variable but clear connections between capitalist economic organization, democratic political institutions, and a liberal ideology placing high value on individual autonomy and rights. It is this historically emergent complex of economy, politics and ideology that I seek to better understand. The term is used descriptively and analytically, not normatively, to identify a complex historical form of society, not simply a 'layer' of ideology or values within that form.

Before advancing a framework for the cultural analysis of liberal legitimacy, I examine the general concept of legitimacy, outline the difficulties of studying legitimacy in liberal contexts, and pose a general perspective and approach for studying legitimization processes in liberal society.

*Conceptualizing Legitimacy.* Weber's influential conception of legitimacy, which has shaped much of our thinking on the subject, contains a bedeviling ambiguity. On one hand he treats legitimacy as a belief in the rightness of a given social order: 'action, especially social action which involves a social relationship, may be guided by the belief in the existence of a legitimate order' (1978: 31; cf. Poggi 2001). On the other, he treats legitimacy as the acceptance of the authority of certain sources (rational, traditional, charismatic) of binding commands (1978: 215; cf. Wrong 2002). The object of legitimacy shifts between belief systems, and more specifiable authorities operating within those systems. In Weber's conception, the acceptance of authority, and the beliefs that underpin that acceptance, are treated as much the same thing. As Schaar (1984) observed, much social science usage replicates this ambiguity, rather loosely equating legitimacy with the belief or opinion that institutions are 'appropriate' and 'morally proper' (see also Zelditch 2001). Beetham (1991) suggests that Weber's notion reduces to the assertion that legitimacy is the belief that something is legitimate, which is close to tautology, and anchors legitimacy in empirically poorly accessible realm of beliefs. His solution is to offer a more operationalised, multidimensional formulation:

Power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that:

- i) it conforms to established rules
- ii) the rules can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate, and
- iii) there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation (1991: 15-16).

This provides a more precise set of criteria for how legitimacy is achieved, and a guide to where we might look to assess the state of legitimacy: to the presence or absence of rule following, of concordant beliefs, and of acts of consent.

Beetham's formulation is very helpful, but I have two reservations, and qualifications to make. First, Beetham's approach is ultimately very state-centric, but legitimacy pertains to power relations generally, throughout society. While states and other political institutions may provide paramount instances of power, power relations and questions of legitimacy pervade society. A 'political science view' of legitimacy yields misleading emphasis on the state, and especially democracy, as the only proper, or at least ultimate objects of legitimacy (e.g. Connolly 1984; Heywood 1994). This diverts us from searching more widely for process of legitimization in other dimensions of social organization. Society involves people in multiple settings and contexts of persistent power relations (families, workplaces, associations, etc.), which involve legitimacy to varying degrees (cf. Layder 2009). The quality of legitimacy in one context may influence or counterbalance its quality in others. This suggests a need to

integrate narrowly political and more broadly sociological scopes for the concept, to grasp a wider causal matrix with an overall dynamic.<sup>2</sup>

Second, despite ambiguities, there are virtues in Weber's wide-ranging conception, which Beetham's focus on the 'how' of legitimation loses sight of. The social objects of legitimation are complexly layered. At a first level, there are clearly constituted loci of authority—persons, organizations, agencies—endowed with certain formally recognized powers. On a second level, there are more general patterns or distributions of power and authority in society, manifest in various social hierarchies. People are generally conscious, however resignedly, of being situated in such hierarchies. Finally, there are entire belief systems and ideologies, that bolster and serve to legitimate the other two levels, but can, *in extremis*, themselves become objects of legitimation and delegitimation—whole patterns of belief can be called into question. Legitimacy can become problematic at each of these levels, but the first level of socially constituted agents is most susceptible to conscious challenge, while the second two layers become progressively more naturalized and taken for granted. But it is precisely the ramping up of disputes over legitimacy, from specific agents of authority, to the general social order and its underpinning beliefs, that is diagnostic of deep social crisis, rather than routine contention around power. This layered image of legitimation processes helps preserve and systematize Weber's insight that both social agents and belief systems can gain or lose authority.

*The Problem of Liberal Legitimacy.* The nature of legitimacy in liberal, democratic, capitalist nation-states is particularly obscure. It is fairly clear how formal democracy reproduces legitimacy by institutionalizing the popular expression of consent to political rule and competition among contenders for political leadership. But publics are often relatively disengaged from political processes, and political authorities and institutions often regarded with distrust. A key problem is the 'invisibility' of well-

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<sup>2</sup> Since the mid-1990s there has been a salutary trend of renewed interest in questions of legitimation processes throughout society, beyond the state *per se*, in ways that are complimentary to the present argument. Jost and Major (2001) bring together an array of scholars, primarily in social psychology, and to a lesser degree sociology and organization studies, focusing, *inter alia*, on how ideologies, social stereotypes, and notions of just distribution get legitimated and delegitimated. More recent work in social psychology explores how micro level perceptions of legitimacy affect cognition and behavior. Lammers *et al* (2008) found in experimental studies that the perception of illegitimacy of a power relationship tended to inhibit the powerful from initiating action, and to increase the readiness of the powerless to initiate action (see also Lammers and Stapel 2009; and Lammers and Galinski 2009). Conceptualizing legitimacy in the broad weberian sense outlined above, Johnson *et al* (2006) review a range of social psychological and organizational studies to identify processes by which 'new social objects', i.e. innovations in either power roles for individuals, or organizational forms, gain local legitimacy and then diffuse and replicate in other local settings, finally achieving more widespread consensual acceptance. These studies suggest new ways of investigating legitimacy below the state, in the complex organizational infrastructures of society. However they are dominated by social psychology, with a much weaker contribution from sociology. Correspondingly, they don't hypothesize the larger, historical and systemic interrelation of legitimation in state, economy and society, the kind of cultural analysis, which I am advocating here.

functioning legitimacy. It is much easier to operationalize legitimacy when it's not working, than when it is. When authoritarian regimes are challenged, or states are too weak to regulate societal conflicts, we see the problem. But when things appear to run smoothly, we begin to doubt whether the idea of legitimacy is even relevant. Perhaps people are ignorant of the power relations they are subject to, and unable to interrogate them, or satisfied by affluence, and uninterested in questioning the power relations that underpin that affluence. Either way, we are presented with the classic problem—how do you study an absence, explain why something ('crisis') isn't happening? Minimally, I suggest that research agendas should not be set in the first instance by what's 'doable', but instead by what we think needs explanation. Fundamentally, there is something logically strange about ascribing regime problems to the failure of legitimacy, without correspondingly ascribing regime stability to the presence and success of legitimacy. Theoretical coherence obliges us to look for this thing that is hard to find.

Reflecting this problem, there are arguments on both left and right to suggest that the idea of legitimacy is irrelevant for understanding such societies. On the left it gets argued that such societies enjoy not so much legitimacy as passive acquiescence to a regime of power that people cannot see beyond (e.g. Herman and Chomsky 1994). On the right one finds the view that questions of the best form of social order have been largely resolved within the western secular tradition, that the legitimacy of capitalism and liberal democracy are now firmly established, both theoretically and in the popular imagination (e.g. Fukuyama 1995). But for the reasons just noted, neither of these positions is satisfactory. The last time the question of liberal regime legitimacy was a focus of lively academic debate was when Habermas (1975), Offe (1984) and others argued that contradictions between the demands of the capitalist economy and the liberal democratic welfare state were leading to 'crisis' tendencies in regard to legitimacy for these kinds of polities. Apart from these debates losing intellectual steam, the fact that the late 1970s into the 1980s in fact saw a reinvigoration of more economically liberal forms of capitalism seemed to undermine the thesis. Ironically, the big story of 'legitimation crisis' in the last 25 years turned out to be the collapse of the Soviet Union. The anticipated crisis of capitalist legitimacy failed to arrive, while the collapse of communist legitimacy took many by surprise. More recently increasing attention is paid to the role of legitimacy in regard to the European Union, which as a relatively new, evolving, and remote governing institution, has an ongoing struggle to build legitimacy (e.g. Arnall and Wincott 2003; Holzacker 2007). And there is growing attention to the legitimacy of transnational bodies and civil society actors in driving political change and law-making (e.g. Warning 2009; Steffek et al. 2007). These are important issues, but also underscore my point. At issue here is the workings of developing political institutions, and the paradigm for inquiry is political science. My interest is in the problem of understanding the legitimation of power as a diffuse social process within liberal nation-states.

*'The Strength of Weak Legitimacy': a framework for cultural analysis.* I have adapted Granovetter's term 'the strength of weak ties' (1973, 1983) as a kind of catchphrase that sums up my approach. His counter-intuitive argument was that networks of 'strong' social ties, based on multiple role relations and enduring interactions, tend toward social closure, while networks of 'weak', looser, more role-specific and episodic social ties, are more likely to ramify and link with other social

networks. Thus 'weak ties' are more likely to create contacts and opportunities for ego (e.g. finding employment), and strengthen ego's strategic social position. Note that this analysis pertains particularly to life in liberal societies, in which fluid market relations fundamentally shape social power and opportunities. However, I am not developing Granovetter's network analysis, it is more the 'spirit' of his argument I want to invoke. Liberal societies maximize systemic social power by allowing and cultivating sub-centers of power 'below' the state, that as long as they remain harnessed to a larger societal-state project, contribute to the overall power and dynamism of that system (Chiot 1994; Hall 1985). The considerable power of the modern, capitalist, liberal democratic state, is achieved by dispersing power relations, and thus processes of legitimation, throughout the system. Thus a vast 'network' of partial power relations, locally legitimized, add up to a strong system, with considerable legitimacy distributed along its sinews, despite the apex of political institutions enjoying only weak or episodic legitimacy.

Capitalist economies and democratic political institutions are mainstays of liberal society. But I want to avoid reducing the idea of liberal society to effects of economic and/or political institutions. Instead I offer a more cultural analysis. By culture I do not mean to specify the arts (elite and popular), intellectual production, or even more widely, systems of meaning and symbols, patterns of beliefs, ideas, values, mores, and so on (cf. Inglis 2004; Jenks 2005; Kuper 1999; Wuthnow 1978). While incorporating this dimension, my conception is not so ideational, instead harking back to an older, more holistic anthropological tradition, in which culture stood for an entire complex of ways of organizing social life, that were at once both material and ideational, both cognitive and affective, and encompassed social structures and institutions, not just ideas about those structures and institutions. What cuts this conception down to size, is the principle that a cultural analysis does not just scoop up anything in its path, but rather assumes that the central problematic of all social relations, is the regulation of power (Author 2006: 207-210). Thus I am primarily interested in core yet ramifying patterns organizing social interaction and regulating power, while also cutting across the conventional analytic divisions of society into separate spheres of, e.g., politics, economics, social institutions, and culture (as values), as found in Parsons (e.g. 1977), or separate layers of the material and the ideational, marxian and otherwise, that however roundly critiqued, still pervade social science thinking, including most conceptions of culture.

To help illustrate this point, consider the classic anthropological concern with kinship in horticultural and agrarian societies. The deeper significance of kinship for such societies is not as a cognitive map that directs social action, but that the structural assignment of people by principles of birth, marriage, or other ritual incorporation into kin groups, regulates the distribution of powers, in terms of access to land and other resources, including status, prestige, offices of communal leadership, and so on (Wolf 2001: 349-352). Kinship was so much a part of culture for early anthropologists, precisely because in many of the societies they studied, it was a core process, binding together diverse dimensions of the social order. One of the key characteristics of liberal society is the severe (though uneven) attenuation of kinship structures. So we must look elsewhere for our core patterns regulating social power, and should expect, given the scale, complexity, and dynamism of liberal society, a more multiple and manifold set of patterns, rather than a single dominant principle. This is what I aim to do in the next section, focusing on the themes of the state-

economy relationship, civil society, private versus public, and competition. Cultural analysis, as I envision it here, will not claim an exhaustive systemic account of society. Its merits lie in foregrounding underlying patterns that link together diverse aspects of society, stimulating inquiry, and challenging conventions of social analysis that artificially (though sometimes usefully) divide society into 'spheres', 'layers', 'domains' and so on.

*On Hegemony.* Interlocutors have suggested that the established concept of 'hegemony' might be better suited for the kind of analysis I am proposing. However, key features of the idea distinguish it from what I mean by 'weak legitimacy'. Whether in its original sense of domination or leadership of one state over others, or the later Marxian sense influenced particularly by Gramsci (1971), of the domination of a bourgeois class or 'historical bloc' of classes, hegemony specifies an underlying relationship of domination, however obscure this may be to those subject to it (Williams 1983: 144-146). With 'weak legitimacy' I am trying to focus on deeply embedded structures of belief and action, that are not themselves relations of domination, however much they might enable these. Next, hegemony is an irreducibly 'strategic' concept. Its formulation and use, particularly in the Marxian variant, is bound up with engaged political practice, and the analysis of how domination is achieved, and countered (Anderson 1976-77). This is particularly evident in one of its furthest, ultimately post-marxian developments in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), in which the economic and class analysis basis of the Marxian concept is abandoned, in favour of an idea of purely discursive, and relatively undetermined strategies of alliance among diverse subaltern groups (cf. Wood 1998). The idea of 'weak legitimacy' does not have this strategic dimension. Its purpose is to help describe and analyse liberal society as we find it; whether it has strategic utility would be a separate question. Finally, Gramsci's concept is often presented as 'cultural hegemony', highlighting that domination is achieved by making the specific ideas and interests of the dominant class(es) seem general and part of a naturalized 'common sense'. It is seen as describing a struggle over culture-as-dominant-ideas, in which the aim is to cultivate the practical consciousness of subordinate groups/classes, so that these can provide an alternative common sense, and basis for political action (Bobbio 1988; Fontana 2005; Roseberry 1989: 44-49). But as I've indicated, I am couching 'weak legitimacy' within a very different, much less ideational notion of culture, which aims to describe how power relations are routinely reproduced and legitimated, but does not offer in itself an alternative, or pose the problems of power as fundamentally epistemological. I conclude by noting correspondences between 'hegemony' and Billig's (1995) idea of 'banal nationalism'. While Billig seems more directly influenced by Bourdieu's notions of habitus and symbolic power (1991), these too bear resemblances to the concept of hegemony. With 'weak legitimacy', by contrast, the emphasis is not on the discursive framing of understanding and its implicitness, but rather on the institutional, organizational and ideological embedding of power relations, which is implicit in some contexts, but quite explicit in others.

## **A Framework for Cultural Analysis**



I now develop the approach outlined in the previous section by pursuing four key themes: state and economy, civil society, public and private, and competition<sup>3</sup>. Each serves as a lens for examining legitimation processes in liberal society, and is worth fuller exploration on its own. Taken together they provide an initial framework for thinking about liberal legitimacy as a society-wide, cultural process.

*State and Economy: the 'memorable alliance'*: The most fundamental structural aspect of power and legitimation in liberal societies, at once both institutional and ideational, is the division between, yet interdependence of, state and economy. As Weber argued, modern rational capitalism was the unintended outcome of the 'memorable alliance' of early modern mercantile bourgeoisies creating money through lending to monarchical European states locked in mercantile and military competition (Weber 1927: 337; Ingham 2008: 32-33; 126-17, *passim*). Today, capitalist liberal democracies operate on the basis of a balance of powers between core institutions of state and economy. The power and authority of the state relies on the productivity and robustness of the economy, and capacity for wealth creation by economic actors is underwritten by the state's administration and protection. This twinned, reciprocal concentration of powers involves high degrees of both relative autonomy and interdependence for these two sectors. The significance for processes of legitimation however, is that this reciprocal structure of organizational power is unevenly represented in public discourse. The state is normally represented as a social artifice whose powers are constituted, the legitimacy of which by definition is open to constant question. The economy is more often represented as 'harnessed nature', as a source of power that is naturally given, and not subject to legitimation in the same way, however much the social mediators of that power might be.

There is a curious structural echo here of those antecedent western European polities, in which legitimation revolved around a dualistic reciprocal dynamic between the secular and sacred powers of the state and church (see Poggi 2001: 74-96). With secularization and the growth of the modern economy, increasingly it is the economy and its mediators, rather than the divine and its priests, that claim the closest proximity to ultimate power, and the capacity to negotiate between it and the civic powers. In both cases, power and its legitimation is represented as dual and differentiated, with the state/secular powers ultimately accountable for worldly politics, societal administration, and so on, while economic/religious powers are less explicitly accountable to those they govern, instead interceding between transcendent sources and earthly civic institutions of power.

Intellectuals and academics significantly shape our catalogue of ideas and vocabulary for collectively representing state, economy, and their relationship. As Polanyi (1957) argued, the very idea of the economy as a distinctive, society-wide sphere of activity, functioning according to an independent set of laws and principles, emerges historically along with capitalism (cf. Murray 1997: 5-7). The predominant modern academic disciplines of economics and political science tend to institutionalize and ideologically entrench the public perception that these are clearly distinct spheres of life, only contingently related, despite countervailing voices from fields such as

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<sup>3</sup> 'Science' provides another mode of legitimation (cf. Habermas 1970), but this is generally true for modern society, and not specific to liberal society, so I have left it aside.

economic sociology (Smelser and Swedberg 1994) and political economy (Cohn 2008: 3-4; cf. Wolf 1982: 7-19). On balance, academics as a whole have been complicit in exaggerating the autonomy of economic and political power, and over-associating problems of legitimacy with the state, thereby obscuring the 'memorable alliance' that we continue to live under.

This basic pattern is replicated in predominant political discourses and associated political parties, those of the left favoring state powers and more inclined to critique economic powers, while those of the right favor maximizing power for major economic actors, while maintaining a critical eye on the powers of the state. By their discursive polarization, they tend to exacerbate the view of state and economy as locked in a zero-sum struggle for power. On whole citizens of such societies tend to relate to this dual power structure ambivalently, both suspicious and pragmatically supportive of both centers of power, because they sense it is this dual relationship that drives the economic prosperity that they generally enjoy. Nonetheless, the dominant paradigm represents the economy as a natural force to be harnessed and cultivated, and the government of the day is judged on how well or poorly it achieves this. Thus the burdens of authority and legitimacy tend to fall on the state and its occupants, more so than on economic organizations and actors. However, in periods of economic strain and dysfunction, such as we are currently experiencing in the wake of the sub-prime mortgage lending debacle, that the veil of naturalized power falls, and the artificial and 'earthly' nature of economic power, and questions of its legitimacy and competent management, are more fully exposed. But we should expect a reassertion of the naturalizing tendency in regard to economic power, because this is part of what validates the political powers of democratic institutions, to be affirmed not just by 'the will of the people' as citizens and voters, but by its successful relationship to a transcendent source of power, whether 'god', or the 'economy'.

*Civil Society:* Civil society, the capacity of large populations to enjoy relative autonomy from the control of kin groups and state, and to associate and mobilize around common interests, is historically bound up with the formation of liberal society (cf. Gellner 1996; Hall and Trentmann 2005). Indeed, the great dualism of economic and state powers just discussed was crucial to its emergence in the modern period. It is that over-arching balance of power that fosters over time the multiplication of smaller, more localized centers of organizational power, whether enterprises seeking economic opportunity, or other forms of association seeking to protect or advance collective interests. Thus 'civil society' as I use it includes all kinds of activity, not just self-organization around social, political, and charitable causes, as is often the case in the recent revival of the term (cf. Klein and Stern 2006: 48). The key point here is that each diverse form of social organization within this manifold, precisely because it enjoys relative autonomy, provides an arena for more localized processes of legitimacy, for challenging or affirming leadership, governance structures, or concordance with core values (to echo Beetham's model). And this happens in contexts that are much more immediate, tangible and evident in their consequences for those involved, than the encompassing structures of government and economy. The very principle of civil society allows for the correction of weak local legitimacy, in that if an organization one is involved in loses legitimacy (the pastor is too liberal, the head teacher is incompetent, the CEO lacks vision) one can withdraw and reinvest one's energies elsewhere (Hirschman 1970). Up to a point of course. The ability to 'shop around' is strongly conditioned by the resources at one's

command—structural poverty severely constrains choices. And some involvements are more binding than other. It may be easier to choose another church than to choose another employer. Be that as it may, the broader point holds that liberal society, in maximizing these opportunities for choice and involvement, effectively distributes legitimation problems and processes more widely, variably and diffusely, throughout the social system.

The function of political parties in the liberal system deserves attention here. These are ambivalently situated in the civil society-state relationship. By their nature, parties are designed to move into and out of the state. When successful, they acquire the offices and powers of government, and when unsuccessful, they lose these and are thrown back down into civil society. Thus smaller, cause-oriented ‘third’ parties, such as the Greens, manage to seem more ‘of’ civil society, precisely because of their limited access to state power. But the major parties (especially in two-party systems) oscillate between state and civil society, gaining legitimacy when they are ‘out of power’ and ‘closer to the people’, and then in a sense slowly being drained of legitimacy the longer they are ‘in government’, and inevitably shown to be limited in their capacity to control events. Thus, in the liberal democratic system, they function like dredges, scooping up legitimacy in the realm of civil society, and delivering it to the state, which suffers from chronic depletion of legitimacy.

I treat civil society largely as a structural concept with descriptive utility, but its revival and return in academic parlance in the last two decades has much to do with its rhetorical effects. As rallying cry for those seeking to break with Soviet rule in eastern Europe and the now post-soviet states (Pelczynski 1988; Hann 1995), or as a replacement for class among post-marxists in the ‘west’ looking for a new basis for mobilization and legitimacy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Cohen and Arato 1992), it has carried a heavy normative and strategic load. Reiterating my comments about Gramsci’s hegemony, I invoke it here not as a device of social critique or political mobilization, but as part of an explanation of the diffusion of power relations and legitimation problems in liberal society, and the relative stability this enables.

*Public and Private:* If the preceding discussions of state, economy and civil society outline, in a sense, the ‘anatomy’ of liberal society, the next sections on the public/private dichotomy, and competition, while still concerned with institutional structures, take us more to the ‘spirits’ that animate the social body.

All societies of any scale and complexity exhibit some distinction between public and private spheres, but this distinction is particularly pronounced in liberal society, and crucial for the allocation of power and the cultivation of legitimacy. By placing legal limits on the extension of the powers of the state, the state affirms, within limits, a sphere of autonomous powers, and myriad loci for more localized processes of legitimation (Bobbio 1989: 1-21). The spatial metaphor is of course deceptive, because the two sides are mutually constituted. For instance, it takes the public power of the state to create and support the value of money, which then facilitates (again within limits) the private pursuit of diverse wants and goals. Precisely because it is so central to the constitution of liberal society, the private/public boundary becomes a fulcrum for contestation, e.g. over the right of the state to intervene in matters of abortion, assisted suicide and sexual behavior, to collect and hold genetic data, or the responsibility of the state to protect children at risk, provide healthcare, or a national

broadcasting network. So in one sense, the modern liberal state penetrates as never before into personal life and decision-making, but in another, it provides exceptional conditions for, and protection of, the private pursuit of ends.

The idea of civil society rests awkwardly on this distinction. For some it is precisely a realm where *public* political interests are formulated and mobilized. Its significance is as a space in which multiple sub-centers of organization and solidarity around causes can be cultivated, and brought to bear on the wider society and the state<sup>4</sup>. For others, it is primarily a realm where people are allowed to go about their *private* business unhampered. Its significance is precisely in providing release from binding obligations, and the space to cultivate true autonomy and individualism. These understandings tend to align, respectively, with a ‘new left’ oriented to post-materialist politics organized around identities and issues, and a ‘classically liberal’ right concerned to protect liberal individualism from the encroachments of the modern state. The point however, is that this is not simply a contradiction in theoretical understandings to be resolved, it is a description of the dynamic by which the cultivation and legal construction of a relatively private sphere, diffuses power and processes of legitimation into the wider society, creating bodies which can both stand at a distance from, and address themselves to, the public sphere, and ultimately state power. The capacity of the liberal state to legitimate itself via civil society by allowing dissent, and plural and alternative centers of authority and legitimacy, rests on this public/private distinction.

The boundary, or perhaps better the ‘allocation’, between public and private is made materially manifest especially through notions of property. In law, property is frequently conceived as a ‘bundle of rights’, the allocation between persons, or to persons by a public power, of certain rights in both material and non-material things. It rests on the idea of a sovereign that can allocate such bundles of rights, both in principle and in practice, and that in doing so, in a sense devolves a portion of that sovereignty in the act. So, just as the UK state has sought to enhance its overall legitimacy in recent years by devolving legislative and administrative powers to some of its parts in Scotland and Wales, by creating sub-powers with political legitimacy closer to the ground<sup>5</sup>, so the entire system of property, at the micro level, cultivates systemic legitimacy, by allowing spheres of limited sovereignty allocated to individuals and collectivities. Contra the marxian tradition, private property, while it may involve the alienation and mystification of labor power, also involves the devolution of power, in this special sense. Pragmatically, it often appears as the best means that those with little power and resources have, of increasing control over their own lives. But contra some versions of classical liberalism, public and private sovereignties are mutually constituting and interdependent. In one sense liberal

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Habermas’s idea of the ‘public sphere’ (1989) and its critical reception, e.g. Calhoun (1992), Fraser (1990).

<sup>5</sup> As indicated by recurrent poll results showing that most Scots would like to see the powers of their parliament increased (Curtice et al. 2009: 62), even while they may have some reservations about its actions.

society just is an ongoing power struggle over the public and private allocation of property.

The preceding puts the 'household' in an interesting light. As a unit of income (if rarely production these days) and consumption, a cluster of properties (a 'bundle of bundles'), it is the key point at which the counter-sovereignities afforded by private property, become more than just vehicles of personal choice, and particularly in multi-individual households, the place where the private is re-collectivized. The sovereignty of the modern household, however hemmed in, is one of the most important forms of 'devolution' at the disposal of the liberal state. Both the broad appeal of converting public to private housing in the UK in recent decades, and the reckless proliferation of sub-prime mortgages in the US in recent years, are testaments to this point. The proliferation of relatively cheap commodities for the household, especially in the form of home entertainment, computing, and cell phones, augments the sense of the household as a sphere of autonomy and self-determination. Feminist scholars have long noted a dark side to the household in regard to gender relations (Reiter 1975; Walby 1990; Okin 1991). The private 'domestic' sphere also provides a means of devolving and reproducing patriarchal relations ('a man's home is his castle'), *inter alia*, by keeping women relatively confined to that sphere, making them disproportionately responsible for providing unpaid labor for its maintenance, and by situating men as heads with preponderant control of household resources. As much as we may disapprove of this situation (which isn't historically static), the point holds that by its very internal hierarchy (also over children) the household even more exemplifies a micro-zone of sovereignty, especially for the head of household, whatever their gender. The greater power that supports the conditions for this system of local rule, the liberal state, thereby benefits from the reflected legitimacy of the household.

Finally under this head, we must not forget the public protection of the individual body and mind as private domains. The growth of consumer culture, along with expanding the capacity to pursue luxury and recreational goods according to personal taste, has seen waves of liberalization of bodily presentation, in terms of dress and adornment, indeed a positive encouragement to assert one's individualism through one's appearance. Even if this kind of self-determination is ultimately trivial, it is nonetheless visceral, and responds to a demand. More deeply however, fundamental freedoms of belief, conscience, and self-expression, with institutional origins particularly in the religious conflicts of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, should not be taken for granted. One's ability to commit freely to ideas and values manifests a kind of personal sovereignty. By expanding the range of possible objects of belief, appetite, and fantasy, liberal and consumer culture provisions us with myriad means for occupying our thoughts and feelings, facilitating the exercise of sovereignty within the more private universe of mind and body.

*Competition:* There is a tradition of 'conflict theory' in sociology (Collins 1975; Coser 1956; Rex 1961) that places social conflict, its dynamics and regulation, at the centre of sociological explanation. But there is no general 'sociology of competition', despite the extreme elaboration of this social form in liberal society, and its core role in processes of legitimation. With only a few exceptions (e.g. Simmel 1955: 57-85; Helle 2008; Deutsch 1949), competition arises mainly as a particular conceptual focus within specific fields, not surprisingly economic sociology (e.g.

Brown, P. 2000; Burt 1993; Podolny 2005; Uzzi 1997) but also others such as the sociologies of science (e.g. Hagstrom 1974) and education (e.g. Dunlop 1976). I suggest that a more general sociology of competition is needed.

The difference between conflict and competition is important. Social conflict occurs in any clash of interests and/or ideas, and can be relatively unbounded and open-ended, oriented either to zero-sum claims over limited goods or ends (e.g. territory), or to vying attempts to realize fundamentally incompatible ends (e.g. communism versus capitalism). Competition refers more narrowly to an effort to outperform others in a structured context, in order to lay claim to some mutually desired, but unsharable end (a job, an award, market share, etc.). Competition is social conflict controlled, channeled, and regulated, placed within a frame of shared understanding. While we sometimes use the term in a generic sense to refer to struggles to obtain goods in life, its distinctiveness lies in its proximity to the idea of a 'contest', of such struggles bounded by formal rules, and often highly ritualized.

Outside of human social life, the main area where we use the term competition, is in regard to ecology and evolution, to understand how species compete to occupy ecological niches, and genes spread through, or are winnowed out, of populations. Here again, it is the focused contest over some limited ecological or genetic 'space' that makes the term competition rather than conflict appropriate. Without challenging this appropriateness, we can nonetheless observe the powerful naturalizing ideological effect of a term that appears to apply in similar ways across the human and non-human worlds. Just as we noted above that the powers of economic institutions appear more natural than those of political institutions, and provide a kind of ultimacy in the mutual legitimation of economic and political power, so the idea of competition also provides a bridge from human-made forms of contest, to principles of nature itself. In a world where centralized sources of religious and moral authority have weakened, this naturalization provides an alternative kind of authority.

The idea of competition not only has this naturalizing connotation, it is also constitutive of legitimation processes for the liberal economy and state. It is not simply that competition occurs, but that outcomes are the result of competition, and this is what renders them, culturally, fair and valid. Because we are accustomed to thinking about legitimacy in terms of the validation of an authority that has the power to make binding decisions (whether a person or an institution), it is easy to lose sight of the way that competition itself, as an accepted means of adjudicating outcomes, legitimates these in a way in which 'authority' in its fullest sense, recedes into the background, absorbing legitimation into the process of competition. Of course forms of competition vary, in some the very outcome identifies the appropriate 'winner' (first over the finish-line, most correct answers, or votes), in others there are 'judges' who, perhaps through further contestation, reach an agreed outcome (and whose judgment may be challenged). In the latter cases the role of the 'authority', particularly in the sense of an expert, comes back in. The point is that the arbitrary judgment of the contextually powerful is supposedly minimized, and subordinated to a process which is itself legitimate.

If competition were merely central to the core institutions of economy and politics, and marginal in other parts of social life, the present argument would be weakened. But the situation is the opposite, competition is a ramifying cultural trope. It is

difficult to find any area where it is not routinely implemented. Current debates in the UK about how to improve standards in school education involve the merits of testing, which inevitably involve competition for ranking among schools, and institutions of higher education must compete with each other in formal rankings of their research and teaching performances. Competition sports is a central cultural pastime, providing daily drama in the form of contest, and even in the realm of television entertainment, increasingly ‘unknowns’ or quasi-celebrities (‘like you or me’) compete to become pop stars, ballroom dancers, models, or to last the longest sequestered in a house, or the jungle. In these iconic cultural rituals, competitors have to perform, undergo tests of skill and endurance, be subject to the decisions of a panel of judges, and succeed in public votes, often in complex combinations. The point is simply that liberal culture is saturated by competition, from the serious business of the allocation of economic resources, to a gamut of leisure pastimes, and in this way isomorphic processes of legitimation both large and small are diffused throughout the social system. In this light it is worth remembering a point often made, that as long as it is contained within shared rules, conflict, in the form of competition, can actually create and strengthen social ties (Gluckman 1955; Haugaard 1997).

Observing that liberal society exhibits extreme cultural elaboration of competition, is not to argue that competition is somehow alien to human nature, a modern by-product of the capitalist economy. Diverse forms of competition can be found across a wide array of human societies, competition for territory and resources, for advantageous marriages, for bureaucratic positions, for the favor of supernatural beings, *ad infinitum*. Even the idea that this liberal elaboration of competition was kick-started by capitalism in the first instance is problematic. In the west European heartland of capitalism’s formation, it was increasingly imperial competition between growing dynastic states, in the exceptionally politically fragmented European peninsula (cf. Chirot 1994; Hall 1985; Tilly 1975), that drove the growth in banking, the search for new world resources, and eventually the growth of commerce and capitalism. It might be illuminating to think in terms of the rise, not of capitalism, but of ‘systematically competitive society’, in which there was a complex development of the institutionalization of competition across multiple domains: economy, politics, religion, arts and letters, popular culture, and so on.

## Conclusions

For the great imperial culture of the Aztecs (c. 1350-1521), the key symbol of power that leaps to mind is the practice of ceremonial human sacrifice. Less widely known is that this pinnacle ritual of blood-letting took place within a cultural context in which small ritual acts of autosacrifice, personal blood letting in order propitiate gods and purify the soul, were part of the routine of everyday Aztec life. A chain of cultural significance ran from piercing one’s earlobe with a maguey thorn to extract a few drops of blood, to help insure personal good fortune, and cutting the heart out of a living war captive with a flint knife, to ensure the cosmic and ecological balances on which the whole society was based. In both instances, at the same time that cosmic and moral order was being affirmed, complex social hierarchies were being legitimated (Wolf 1999: 133-195). Similarly, a chain of significance runs from our minor daily encounters with competition, whether at work or at leisure, and the great competitions for political office and economic might that frame liberal society. It runs also from our personal experiences of distinctions between private and public

dimensions of our own lives that we want to preserve, and great public debates about the proper limits of the state's claims on the individual, and vice-versa. And as with the Aztecs, profoundly unequal distributions of social power are reinforced and legitimated through these chains of significance. In both cases, core, ramifying patterns of belief and action, institutionally sustained, embed personal experiences of power and its legitimation within a corresponding cosmology of social power.

To return to my 'hook' borrowed from Granovetter, the historical success of liberal societies despite relative political disengagement of large portions of the citizenries from those systems, is only seemingly paradoxical. A complex web of weaker and more localized spheres of authority and legitimation, add up to a systemically strong and highly adaptable form of society, despite the indeterminate appearance of collective private investment in public authority. To return to basic conceptual problems, we need to understand how power relations in the societies we live in actually are mediated, and it is not adequate to either deny or exaggerate systemic legitimacy, simply on the basis of an absence of either resounding affirmation of, or challenge to, state power from those subject to that power. The process is much more subtle than that. Moreover, if one wants to have an active critical public discourse in regard to power, then that implies engagement with ideas of authority and legitimacy as such, not just shadowy power processes going on behind our backs. Central to my argument is that the processes that legitimate liberal society, far from being hidden, are in such plain view that we take them for granted. My purpose in this preliminary cultural analysis, is to reorient our attention towards them, and the larger social patterns they are part of, so that we can better describe and analyze our own society, and where necessary, critique it.

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